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Be my guest! Challenges and practical solutions of undertaking interviews in the home with children

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Abstract

This article aims to share critical debate around undertaking interviews with children in the home setting and draws on the authors' extensive research fieldwork. The paper focuses on three key processes: planning entry to the child's home, conducting the interviews and exiting the field. In planning entry, we include children's engagement and issues of researcher gender. In conducting the interviews, we consider issues such as the balance of power, the importance of building a rapport, the voluntary nature of consent and the need for a flexible interview structure. Finally, we address exiting from the child's home with sensitivity at the end of the interview and/or research study. Whilst undertaking research in the child's home provides a more known and familiar territory for the child, it does mean that the researcher faces a number of challenges, that require solutions while they are a guest in a child's home.

Key words: child, fieldwork, health, interviews, qualitative research, young people

Introduction

Interviews are a core instrument when undertaking research with childrenⁱ as they create opportunities for researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of children's perspectives. Interviews can be used both in their traditional format as well as more creatively as part of a

growing number of participatory methods such as story games, drawings, scrapbooks, mapping photographs and videos (Carter 2006, Coad 2007, Marshall *et al.* 2009). This paper draws on the authors' experiences of conducting interviews in children's own homes. Home is not a homogenous setting and is influenced by various factors such as economic, cultural, social and geographical factors. However, within this paper 'home' refers to the *place where children normally live, with people they call their family* [Whall, 1993]

Interviews are often undertaken with children in their family home as it is perceived to be the child's home territory; a safe and secure place which avoids some of the difficulties and tensions that may occur in health, school or other settings. Despite the plethora of papers about interviewing children and young people (Kortesluoma *et al.* 2003) there is little critical debate in the literature about interviewing in the homes of children and young people (MacDonald and Greggans 2008, Mayall 2008). This is intriguing as there are numerous ethical and methodological issues (Carter 2009) that need to be considered before a researcher enters the child's home, while they are there and when they leave. These issues include thorough preparation in advance of the interview that helps in thinking through both practical and research process issues such as: establishing rapport, allowing sufficient time, how to conduct the interviews, gaining consent and ensuring confidentiality and safety.

This article draws on extensive qualitative field work undertaken by the authors with the aim of critically exploring the complexities and challenges of undertaking interviews with children in the home setting. The discussion that follows critically considers three key elements: planning entry to the child's home; conducting the interview in the child's home; and exiting the child's home at the end of the interview. Two case exemplars with suggested options are also used to guide other researchers working in the field.

Planning entry to the child's home

In this section of the paper we discuss children's involvement in planning recruitment, consider the complexities regarding interviewing children alone or with a parent present and discuss the

influences of the researcher's gender. The need for careful planning of data collection before entering the field has been identified by Christensen and James (2008) and these particular issues have been chosen for discussion because they add to the scholarly debate around preparing to interview children in their home.

Engaging and building a rapport with a child is important for the success of an interview, the foundations of which are laid in the way the study is communicated during the recruitment phase. Communication of the research in a way that resonates with and is understood by children and families is also important for supporting the process of informed consent (Bray 2007, Burke and Diekema 2006, Conroy and Harcourt 2009) and targeting a diverse range of social (such as age, gender, cognitive ability) and health characteristics (Carter and Ford 2013, Claudio and Stingone 2008, Kellett 2010). However, ways of recruiting children to qualitative studies is rarely shared in the children's health care literature, despite reported difficulties (Tait *et al.* 2004).

Involving children in the development of recruitment strategies is a step towards ensuring the way that the research is communicated is relevant and applicable to the target population. Children will often have different views about research to their parents and therefore need to be involved in the planning phase to ensure the opportunity for them to take part is maximised (Scott 2008, Brody *et al.* 2005). Engaging children in research design is neither routinely undertaken (Morabia and Costanza 2010) nor always straightforward (Brody *et al.* 2005, Chang *et al.* 2004, Kellett 2010) but can benefit both the research and the person involved (Kirby 2004). Engaging children requires commitment and planning (Moules 2012) and the ideal approaches involve building the capacity of children as co-researchers (Lundy and McEvoy 2012). The importance of acknowledging the participation rights of children (Bell 2008) is now evident throughout current government thinking in the UK (Coad and Houston, 2007) although how to do this for children (and adults) is less clearly articulated (Telford *et al.* 2004, Barber *et al.* 2007). However, there are ways which can improve children's engagement with research design as we now explicate.

Guaranteeing that children are able to inform the design and planning of the research interview is something that all the authors of this paper are committed to and have experience of. Child advisors can contribute at the planning stage in a number of important ways (Lundy *et al.* 2011). In a study led by one of the co-authors (Milnes *et al* 2013a, 2013b) young people were involved in the capacity of advisors and participants. Accessing expert groups of this age group was done through advertising in the e-journals for the University's widening participation health mentor scheme. Six young advisors were recruited and due to the geographical distance between them they were consulted through email, hotmail, MSN and text messaging. They supported the development of the information sheets and suggested incentives such that would be suitable for their age group e.g. high street vouchers, cinema tickets, prize draw of an iPod or camera. They were also involved in developing the interview topic guides that were then used in interviews with young people (aged 1-18years) in their homes. During these qualitative interviews participants were asked for their views of these strategies. Although the video and blog were not mentioned, young people highlighted the need for study information to be sent directly to them as this helped them to feel more significant. It became apparent that young people preferred information by post rather than by email or on a website because they associated email with homework. The reward of a high street voucher was appreciated although the main reason they stated for taking part was altruism.

This is just one example but accessing and inviting children and young people to become advisors to the research plans can be facilitated through a variety of different forum. Other examples of such forums include existing patient groups or forums, patient advice and liaison services, existing links to school, college or youth groups, expert patient groups, and charity web sites. Engaging children in the process of research design requires invitations to take account of factors such as their age, cognitive ability and existing commitments including school and after school activities (Moules 2012). These factors may mean that traditional modes of engagement such as group meetings may be challenging due to the tension between children's social and educational commitments and releasing time to take on the role of advisor or researcher. Alternative methods of communication/correspondence such as email, social networking sites (MSN) and text messaging (Kew 2010) may overcome some of these issues as

demonstrated by Milnes *et al* (2013a, 2013b). These approaches mean that topics can be discussed virtually and feedback from a geographically disparate group can be provided to the project steering group. A further advantage of using such methods is that they create an immediate and accessible record of the ideas and suggestions shared.

Planning and preparing for an interview with a child includes consideration of whether to interview the child alone or with parent/adult carers present. It is known that children may feel able to explore some aspects of their experience more freely without their parent(s)' presence (Callery *et al.* 2003, Christensen and James 2008b, Coad and Coad 2008, Gibson *et al.* 2005) but negotiating this with the child and parent(s) requires tact and sensitivity, especially since the researcher is a guest in the family home. Gardner and Randall (2012) have commented on their experience of interviewing children both alone, and with parents present. While they found that on occasions parents can act to limit children's contribution, parents can also act as valuable "proxy" researchers helping children to contextualise their contribution. Based on our experience, we take the view that the dynamics of family life and need for the child and parent(s) to feel safe have to be respected (Masson 2000). The additional planning and negotiation required is often worthwhile. The parent(s) and the child need to be reassured that the child is safe and the researcher is trustworthy; this cannot simply be conveyed in a patient information sheet and often it relies on good communication and establishing rapport (Randall 2012). Pre-interview visits with children and their parents can be helpful in building a rapport and familiarity regarding the researcher, the details of the project, the consent/assent process, the interview process, and the recording equipment (Callery *et al.* 2003). However, this additional visit may be burdensome for the child and/or family (MacDonald and Greggans 2008) and has obvious implications on the project's timeline and budget. In addition to the building of rapport the gender of the researcher should be considered as part of the preparation for interviewing children at home. Gender in research with children has been considered by social care and education researchers (Connolly 2008) but gender is a factor which has often been overlooked in the health based literature on interviewing children. In some cultures the work of looking after children is designated women's work (Mayall 2002) and, arguably, the work of researching children may be seen as women's work too. Scourfield and Coffey (2006) report

how men researching children may be viewed with suspicion, just as men delivering care may be perceived as 'suspicious' care givers (Evans 2002). Experience suggests that male researchers planning to conduct home-based interviews with children may have to overcome additional – albeit erroneous – safeguarding concerns from gatekeepers (such as Ethics Committees) (Duncan *et al.* 2009) compared to those faced by female researchers. Legitimate safeguarding concerns need to be raised and addressed regardless of the gender of the researcher. Perhaps more important than gender is the researcher's ability to recognize anxiety or distress which may be transmitted by verbal or nonverbal cues during the interactions. Equally essential is the notion of 'ethical mindfulness' [being alert and attuned to potential ethical issues] which should underpin every aspect of a researcher's practice (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, Connelly 2008, Guillemin *et al.* 2009, Duncan *et al.* 2009).

Conducting the interview in the child's home

Location, location, location! The decision of where to hold interviews is an important one, and should be part of early discussions when designing a study if we are to exploit the difference that place makes to research methods (Anderson and Jones 2009). The 'where of method' has in fact received minimal attention, with a focus on the challenges of data collection in such places as an educational environment, home or other 'childhood' arenas, prioritised above discussions about place and its impact on knowledge generation. Conversing with children in their home may produce specific dilemmas, such as ensuring confidentiality and privacy for the child, while satisfying the social conventions of being a guest in someone else's home. It may also influence how children respond and hence impact on the data collected (Scott 2008). Mayall (2008 p116) refers to a 'triangle of conventions and negotiations': as an adult, and a guest, the researcher may feel obliged to accept what conditions are offered by the adult, the parent; but as a guest of the child too, the researcher must also take into account their views; but also the adult and child may have negotiated between them how they want the social event to be played out. Arranging a conversation with a child means negotiating with both a parent and child, as well as engaging with the chaos and complexity of everyday family life while trying to undertake qualitative research (MacDonald and Greggans 2008). The context is especially important when dealing with children and families because children and their contexts are interdependent as

they communicate with others through their environment: thus where the interviews are carried out may influence the way children respond (Scott 2008).

In this next section we aim to unpick some of these issues focusing on establishing a setting for the interview that facilitates a child's participation on their own terms (MacDonald and Greggans 2008), addressing the balance of power and the importance of building a rapport (Bradding and Horstman 1999, Christensen 2004), ensuring the voluntary nature of consent (Alderson 2007, Lambert and Glacken 2011) and acknowledging the need for an appropriate but flexible interview structure (Mayall 2008, Scott 2000). Researchers need to be confident that a child is participating on a voluntary basis and this becomes more challenging in the case of children under 16 years and where the consent of the family has been sought (Waterman *et al.* 2001). Masty and Fisher's (2008) proposal of a 'goodness of fit' process reflects a more family-oriented, 'family-fitted' process of consent and is well worth a researcher's consideration.

A key task for any researcher working with children is to try to address the balance of power and create a non-threatening climate (Christensen 2004). There is an inherent power imbalance which needs to be addressed (Kellett 2010) as children and young people may perceive the researcher as an authority figure in the same way that they might view a nurse, doctor, or teacher. Elwood and Martin (2000, p655) noted that 'different interview sites can situate the participants in particular manners that have implications for the power relations of our interview experiences'. Choosing home, over other environments, should maximise the child's control of the situation. This may in fact not be the case, as the home is shared with many other people; parents, siblings, friends can drift in and out, or even stay within the interview space, and may influence the child's willingness to talk. Time should be spent at the outset to negotiate the interview space, working with both adults present and the child to find out where they want the interview to take place, who will be present, and how together we will manage the space to ensure some privacy. In our experience, negotiating space at the outset has ensured that we work with the family, manage potential situations of interruptions and are clear about the role of the parent in supporting and enabling their child to participate. Time should also be taken to get to know children and to find out what is important to them as individuals and that the

researchers value their childhood (Christensen and James 2008), and hence their views and perspectives on their own experiences. Early engagement might involve use of ice-breaking activities to talk about their lives, favourite toys, friends, and important events. A common topic of conversation is often friends and important people at school. Giving the child free rein to lead the conversation means that all the authors of this paper have been introduced to an array of pets, important toys or other pursuits such as computer games or videos. Although time consuming, it is important to convey to the child that their individual thoughts and experiences are valued before the more formal part of the interview is started and data are collected.

In Gibson et al.'s and Horstman et al.'s study in the UK (2008, 2010) , children with cancer were accessed through their treatment hospital or oncology centre. Consequently, in this study, care had to be taken to ensure the whole family understood that neither taking part nor declining to participate in the study would compromise the child's care. Other researchers have noted that when meeting the children for the first time researchers need to adopt a relaxed, friendly manner; introducing themselves by first name; and gave a brief professional history (Kirk 2007). The child or young person also needs to be in possession of the facts about the researcher's credentials and the reason for being there (Bradding and Horstman 1999). Based on our experience, using the child's preferred name, inviting them to ask questions about the project and giving them the opportunity to ask questions about the researcher, helps to reduce the hierarchical nature of the relationship from the start. Children are often curious about aspects of the researchers' lives such as where they live and whether they have children or pets. In this situation where an atmosphere of trust is being created, the researcher must be willing and able to engage in a conversation and respond to appropriate personal questions; otherwise, the relationship is one-way and further reinforces a lack of equality.

A key consideration in research with children and young people who are ill, is that the research may present an additional drain and add burden, when they are already trying to navigate hospital care, various treatment regimens, and keep up with their often busy lives. However, they are often willing and able to contribute and display altruistic attitudes. In Horstman et al.'s (2008) study, participants often referred to making it better for other sick children and the

potential to help other people is a common reason given by children as to why they have participated in research (Wolthers 2006, Callery *et al.* 2003, Lyte *et al.* 2007). In studies where the children were often interviewed at the end of the school day and were aware that the researchers had often travelled a long way care had to be taken to ensure that the child did not feel pressured into taking part (Horstman *et al.* 2008, Coad and Coad 2008). In these circumstances, it takes an unusually assertive and confident child to withdraw from this situation. The onus is therefore on the researcher to be sensitive to any cues that the child is not a willing participant. This was notably illustrated in Horstman *et al.*'s (2008) paper where the parents were very keen for their six year old child to take part but it was apparent that the child was not quite so enthusiastic. The child and researcher compromised and came to an agreement as to what the child was willing to do. Carter (2005) reported a similar situation when returning to undertake a second interview with a child who opened the front door and explained that she was 'just too busy playing to do an interview'. Meanwhile the child's mother was apologising and inviting the researcher in and explaining that her child really did want to do the interview, despite the child clearly arguing to the contrary. The dynamics of family life, courtesy and respect for the child and parents required careful negotiation. Parental insistence can be tricky for a researcher to ignore and can compete with the need to ensure that the child's wishes are always respected. There are many practical challenges when undertaking fieldwork; some of these are presented in Box 1.

In conclusion to this section on conducting interviews, the need to create a setting that facilitates the child taking part in the research process and need for the researcher to possess certain professional and personal skills has been emphasised. The ability to create a safe environment in which the child can disclose opinions about their experiences, perspectives, treatment and personnel, and have this information received with sensitivity and in confidence is crucial. Negotiating interview space and agreeing who participates in the interview, are all part of the planning, planning that must anticipate the unexpected, when entering the home of a child. We have argued here that place is important, and can influence the experience for the child, and can impact positively on data when the circumstances of 'home' as the research setting are all carefully considered. Similar to others, we would suggest that place matters

(Anderson and Jones 2009, Elwood and Martin 2000, Sin, 2003). We would agree with Sin (2003 p311), we need to now demonstrate how the dialogical construction of identities, power and knowledge exists in a dialectic relationship with the 'place' of interview.

Exiting the child's home

In the previous sections we have ascertained that planning and conducting interviews in the home is complex, rewarding and challenging. A great deal of emphasis within proposals, funded protocols and ethics applications is placed on how the researcher will enter the field and then how they will establish, maintain and sustain their relationship with participants. Cutcliffe and Ramcharan (2002 p1005) posit that 'without the presence of an empathic relationship, the intellectual enterprise of qualitative research may well be severely hindered, if not impracticable'. However, if such empathic relationships are central to the enterprise of qualitative research, then it is clear that disengaging from such relationships and exiting the field should be handled sensitively and should be planned with the same thought as given to entering the field (Reeves 2010). In terms of safe transition this is what therapists call the termination phase and is about being respectful, engaging and participatory in the final phase of the process. However, as Ortiz (2004 p467) discusses, exiting the field 'remains a comparatively neglected methodological process'. This would seem to be particularly so within research with children.

Each episode of field work brings with it negotiations when leaving the home (Condell 2008) and, to a degree, these interim exits can help prepare for the final exit. Therefore, the exit from the individual interview should not be viewed as a single event. It is not the case that the researcher can simply cheerfully shout 'goodbye', turn their back on the children and families and step back down the road leaving them to their pre-research/pre-fieldwork life: leaving a child's home needs to be a transitional process. It should be a performance that is enacted by the researcher with due regard to the feelings, experiences, expectations of the child as well as with consideration to their own feelings and experiences. Watts (2008 p10) acknowledges that it is apposite to 'keep in view that the well-being of the researcher is just as much an ethical concern as that of participants'. Simply walking away is often not possible, desirable or moral for

either the researcher or the children and young people. Leave taking is fraught with what Duncan et al., (Duncan *et al.* 2009) describe as potential and often unavoidable ethical dilemmas that we may not have been able to predict or pre-empt. To expand these issues we have included a case scenario in Box 2 with some possible solutions.

Many researchers are surprised by how the process of leaving the field is more difficult than they anticipated and not a 'straightforward matter' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p121). The boundaries of the field are often less clear than originally anticipated and when the research has been undertaken over a prolonged period, relationships often develop into something akin to friendships or to contacts that are sustained beyond the end date of the research study. What Ortiz (2004 p473) describes as 'mutual benefits' such as a sense of mutuality, reciprocity can make it difficult for the highly engaged researcher to determine when they have enough data and when they should be getting ready to leave the field. Leaving the field might seem easy but it is much harder to leave behind the children you have got to know during the course of your research. Simply deciding when to leave the home after a single interview can be tricky as the courtesies that accompany any leave taking require the researcher to not outstay their welcome (Yee and Andrews 2006, Carter 2005).

Liamputtong (2007) writes sensitively about some of these difficulties, which can be particularly challenging when the researcher has been working with vulnerable participants. What is intriguing is the fact that so many researchers are caught unawares by the challenges of leaving the field. Wulff (2000 p157) argues that fieldwork is 'not the kind of compartmentalized experience or practice it is presented as being'. The fact that we establish rapport, relationships and professional/research-friendships with the children and families who contribute to our studies, should prime us for the fact that saying 'goodbye and thank you' is not something that we can simply read from a prepared script. Most researchers, especially those working with children and their families, pride themselves on developing good relationships, gaining trust. Much methodological attention and many methods are directed towards establishing these relationships but there is much less attention paid to the equally important methodological issue of managing the ways in which we exit from people's lives (Irvine and Gaffikin 2006). Bell and Tzou (2007), whose study of how children and families learn about and use personally

consequential science, report on how they found “managing an exit” was as complex as the challenges of gaining entry to the field. The authors have in all their studies wanted the children to feel that they had the final chance to have their say about the departure of the researchers and were not left distressed by the event. Getting this right is clearly a difficult balance.

Whilst the complexities of exiting the field are presented in the literature, there is generally a consensus that, ‘like all other aspects of field relations it usually has to be negotiated’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p121). However, there is less evidence of how to successfully negotiate these challenges. When working with children and their families, negotiations need to acknowledge that within an individual family the children and their parents may wish for different things. The children may be happy enough to move on from the research, while their parents may wish to maintain contact for a more prolonged period or vice versa. These aspects of research are not often reported in the literature but they are the reality of research for many researchers. This requires particular sensitivity from the researcher to ensure that any continued contact with members of the family is appropriate.

Personal experience of the authors would support this proposition as the various ways in which families may choose to say good bye can be a clear reflection on the relative importance they have placed on the research. In one situation a family the researcher had established good rapport with families over a period of time, were very kind and courteous but also matter of fact about saying goodbye. Other families have been more reluctant to part company (Carter 2005). Sometimes researchers have been invited to return to celebrate birthday parties or visit the children in hospital. These are all boundary issues which need careful consideration (Watts 2008) with decisions thoughtfully made about whether to take up offers of continued contact. Certainly from an ethics committee approval perspective, the researcher is unlikely to have approved access beyond the end-date of the study; however, continued access may be the most appropriate, moral and human response.

Although exiting the field can be painful, it reminds the researcher of their ‘primary identity as a researcher’ (Gray *et al.* 2007 p194) and why the relationships were established in the first place. To a greater or lesser extent, exiting the field turns the researcher from a privileged insider back

into an outsider. Whilst it may be the participants who are 'reluctant to let the researcher go' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p121), researchers may well feel a similar reluctance to dissolve the bonds that they have created with children and their families as part of their research study. Ortiz (2004 p469) in a thoughtful discussion on exiting the field observes what he calls an 'implicit methodological irony: [that] the same skills, techniques, or strategies that make fieldwork go well can keep the fieldworker in the field far longer than necessary'.

Watts (2008 p9) talks of the need to create "a sense of emotional balance" within their research. Researchers can experience a wide span of emotions on leaving the home ranging from sadness, loss, guilt and distress through to relief, a sense of completeness and closure. All of these emotions need to be managed, especially when the emotions experienced are at odds with those that were anticipated. Even though they may have exited the field in a physical sense, the field can stay with them emotionally and psychologically. Fox (2004) talks eloquently about how field work and the disciplinary field can prove to be overwhelming and leaving the field can encompass leaving an entire area of research in order to create an emotional distance. This departure from an entire field of endeavour may be rare but in Fox's case it came after five decades of field work in which she described herself as a 'perpetual fieldworker'(Fox 2004 p309).

It is clear that leaving the field and saying goodbye to the children and their families who have contributed to our research is not unproblematic. Like Ortiz (2004) we would agree there is no right way of exiting the field. Exiting draws on the skills we use within the other aspects of our research practice: our imagination, our compassion, our judgement, our intuition, our assessment, our ability to negotiate, our reflexivity and our willingness to be guided by the children and families we have come to know.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on extensive field-work undertaken by the authors in order to share some of challenges of undertaking interviews with children in the home setting. We can conclude that there is a tendency for researchers and reviewers to perceive the home setting as the best

setting for children as they are likely to feel the most safe and secure. However, we have shown that home is a multifaceted setting with complex power relations being enacted within the family and between the family and the researcher. We have also found that there is limited critical evidence on the effects of interviewing children and young people such as how this impacts on data sets, parental/guardian presence and resolutions to challenges that are experienced. We also note that the children in a family, even within their own home environment, are likely to have less power than the adults. Acknowledging this might suggest that researchers should search for a more neutral setting - one chosen by the children themselves, reflecting respect for their capacities, promoting their independence and reflecting principles of empowerment. However, in reality the power relationships would not be negated by a simple move of location albeit that they may be mediated). On reflection on our own experiences the home setting (where possible and appropriate) is the child's preferred setting for being interviewed. However, we recognise the challenges that working as a guest in a child's home places on a researcher. Therefore our foremost advice would be to plan and think through all stages of the research study, especially the interview itself so as to anticipate as many of the pragmatic and ethical issues that might arise. Researchers have to be aware of the potential for intrusion into the lives and homes of children and their families and appreciative of the hospitality that they extend to us. We need to be mindful of our obligation and responsibility to be not just good researchers but 'good guests'.

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Box 1: To stop or not to stop, that is the question

A child, aged 6 years, who has previously been enthusiastic about participating suddenly decides they do not want to carry on with an interview. What do you do? Do you:

1. Immediately stop the interview thus acknowledging the child's right to stop, thank them for their contribution and leave their home without pursuing the matter further?
2. Immediately stop the interview thus acknowledging the child's right to stop, thank them for their contribution but sensitively explore why they wish to stop?
3. Immediately stop the interview thus acknowledging the child's right to stop, thank them for their contribution but sensitively explore why they wish to stop and determine if they want to STOP completely or need to stop for a pause?
4. Immediately stop the interview thus acknowledging the child's right to stop, thank them for their contribution but sensitively explore why they wish to stop and use your judgement to decide whether to suggest they might like to continue?
5. Immediately stop the interview thus acknowledging the child's right to stop, thank them for their contribution but sensitively explore why they wish to stop and use your judgement to decide whether or not you need to do anything about the reason why they said they wanted to stop?

All of these are possible and reasonable things to do. However, the default – apparently most ethical - setting of just 'stopping' the interview, that is Option 1, is potentially the least reasonable thing for a caring adult/researcher to do.

In Option 2, you are giving the child the chance to talk, outside of the interview itself, about something that may be worrying them or simply finding out that they are perhaps bored by the whole process of the research.

In Option 3, far from coercing the child, you may simply be clarifying their use of the word 'stop' as they may want a break from the interview. In our experience interviews rarely run without 'stops' (breaks and interruptions). These breaks can range from comfort breaks to interruptions to play games, go for run round the garden and taking the dog for a walk. (Interestingly, during the breaks you need to use your judgement to determine whether or not information shared with you whilst walking the dog does constitute data). Children (like adult) participants may be

happy for this information to form part of the data, although permission to resume the interview should be sought.

Option 4 can be a way of giving a child the chance of gathering their thoughts. This option can be used where the reason for stopping seems to be more than just the need for a break and the child may be exhibiting some signs of distress. Whilst it is essential to stop when the child says stop, it is also reasonable to give the child a chance to continue as this may provide them with the opportunity to ventilate thoughts and experiences that they genuinely wish to but which they are finding quite hard to do. There is (thankfully) no prescriptive rule book to follow in such situations but the search for the right response relies on the skill, judgement and sensitivity of the researcher and the rapport they have built with the child. Our experience suggests that children are often appreciative of being given permission to stop as well as to restart the interview.

If a researcher has gently explored the reason why the child wants to stop the interview, they then may face the decision as to whether or not they should reveal the reason to the child's parents/carers. This may occur if the child has revealed that they are distressed or feel worried. Making this decision is not easy and will depend on many factors (e.g., reason for distress) and again there is not prescriptive rule book to follow. However, best practice would dictate that the decision should be taken with the child so that they know what the researcher is planning.

Box 2: A question of assent or confusion?

You are feeling pleased with the way the research session has gone. Zac, a 10 year old boy you have been working with signed the assent form and he has apparently enjoyed talking to you and drawing some pictures of his experience of a nurse coming to look after him after he was discharged from hospital. Having been scrupulous in the way that you conducted your field work you have found Zac's perceptions of the nursing care he received really insightful and help explain an aspect of the rest of the data that had been puzzling you. You've already gathered up his paintings and your recorder and you've thanked him and his parents for their help. You are on the doorstep when you notice Zac's looking a bit puzzled. You ask him if he's OK and he initially says "Yes". His mum says "He's fine, aren't you?" You check last one time and then just before you head down the path to leave, Zac says "So who actually are you then and what do you do?" This is immediately followed up by his mum saying "Oh don't take any notice of him, Zac's a terrible tease!" Your sense of feeling pleased suddenly evaporates as you panic that Zac has not understood anything of the process despite all indications that he had given informed consent and understood his involvement?

What do you do? Do you?

1. Take Zac extremely seriously and despite mum's reassurances that he is teasing, work on the assumption that since he doesn't appear to have really understood the process that you will destroy all his data when you get back to your base as you can't possibly use it.
2. Take Zac seriously but talk to mum and ask her to help you assess whether or not Zac does understand?
3. Take Zac seriously, talk to mum but come back into the house and spend time with Zac talking about his understanding and make a decision whether or not he does understand and based on this decide whether or not to retain or destroy the data.
4. Pretend you have not really heard what Zac said, wave goodbye and focus on the great data that you've generated.

Although these are possible responses not all of them are reasonable things to do.

Clearly option 4 is the most unreasonable and unethical thing to do (although you may be a nanosecond when you are tempted to do this!). You cannot simply walk away this situation without exploring it further.

In option 1, you would clearly be respecting Zac's final comments to you that, along with his puzzled expression, seem to be incontrovertible evidence that he did not give truly informed assent and despite mum's reassurances you feel unable to use the data. In this situation whilst you are taking Zac very seriously, you are disregarding mum's input as well as your own initial belief that assent had been achieved. If you don't give Zac a chance to clarify these last comments and you destroy his data then you are potentially disrespecting the time and ideas he contributed to the study.

Options 2 does respect Zac, to a degree, and by talking things through with his mum you may well be reassured by her that Zac is a brilliant tease and that he has been excited about being involved in the study and they have spent a lot of time preparing him for it and answering his questions and explaining things about the study and you (the researcher). However, whilst this adult-adult dialogue might be reassuring it will not have involved Zac and therefore can only be a partially responsible response to the situation/

Option 3, may be the most time-consuming option but it is likely to be most ethical, respectful and reasonable response as it gives weight to both what Zac and his mum said and then making a decision.

Whilst the ultimate decision may rest with the individual researcher and/or principal investigator this sort of decision and the underpinning event would be worth discussing with other members of the research team/supervisory team. All such decisions should be carefully documented as part of the field notes.

1. Chang B-H, Hendricks A, Slawsky M, Locastro J. Patient recruitment to a randomized clinical trial of behavioral therapy for chronic heart failure. BMC Medical Research Methodology 2004;4(1):8.

ⁱ Note: unless otherwise indicated the terms 'child'/'children' are used in the article to refer to a child or young person up to age 18 years old.